

## SOCIAL &amp; EMOTIONAL LEARNING

## Creating Caring Environments

Jeff Walls, former math teacher and Ph.D. candidate in Organizational Leadership, Policy & Development  
June 2016

The 2013-2016 cycle of the Minnesota 4-H Foundation's Howland Family Endowment for Youth Leadership Development is dedicated to understanding social and emotional learning and its contribution to closing the achievement and opportunity gaps. This series of issue briefs, funded in part by Youthprise, is designed to help people understand, connect and champion social and emotional learning in a variety of settings and from a variety of perspectives.

**BACKGROUND**

We expect all educators to care about their students and most educators would profess that being part of a caring profession is important to them personally. Caring, though, is complex. In spite of the lack of clarity, there is consensus that students who experience caring adults in school benefit both personally and academically. Caring has been defined by Milton Mayeroff as “helping the other grow.”<sup>1</sup> Caring has immediate benefits, such as a sense of belonging and increased self-regard, and these changes have longer-term impacts such as a stronger sense of well-being<sup>2</sup>. Caring is also central to promoting student engagement and academic learning<sup>3</sup>. Although some students may have a strong intrinsic interest in certain topics, many students are motivated more by relationships with teachers, peers, parents and the learning environment. For most students to care deeply about learning, students must also feel that adults care deeply about *them*. Unfortunately, many students (and particularly students from historically disadvantaged groups) do not experience educational institutions as caring places.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, educators and policymakers are increasingly interested in how to create caring environments.

The purpose of this brief is to explore the ways that scholars of educational caring have troubled naïve notions of adults caring about young people, and the implications for practitioners and social and emotional (SEL) education. Caring in SEL education environments occurs at three levels: in individual relationships between learners and educators, as part of an organizational environment, and in the broader community context of which both learner and educator are a part. This brief addresses each of these levels in turn, and identifies some implications for practice.

**SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND INDIVIDUAL CARING**

In addition to the connection between caring, student engagement and achievement, research is paying more attention to how schools develop non-academic skills and predispositions that are important for success in school and in later life. Increasingly, there is recognition that the development of certain traits and predispositions are important for students, both in terms of academic outcome and broader life success. This type of learning is referred to as social and emotional learning, which the *Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning* (CASEL) defines as “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the

knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”

Caring, particularly the experience of being part of a caring environment, is directly linked to successful efforts at social and emotional education. Put another way, social and emotional education could also be explained as the way we teach students to care for and about themselves and others. Similarly, practitioners of social and emotional education are engaged in a form of caring- caring about the well-being of their students in a holistic way. Philosopher Nel Noddings suggests that this linkage between caring and teaching-to-care is natural: people learn how to care by experiencing care.

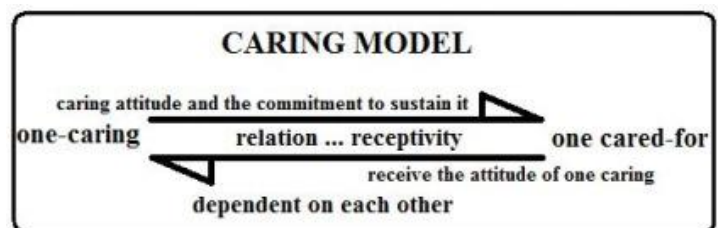
This link, though conceptually sound, is not as simple as it appears at first blush. Any educator can recount times when attempts to show caring students have been received in ways other than what the educator intended. Rather than experiencing care, students may be resistant or resentful, which sets up a cycle that increasingly leads to educator burnout and disengagement.

Noddings argues that in order for an action to be caring, it must be both intended and received as caring. She posits that caring is based in either expressed or inferred needs. Sometimes, the expressed needs of a learner run counter to the inferred needs of an educator- Noddings gives the example of a student, who expresses a need to talk, and a teacher, who infers a more pressing need for the student to listen, which may cause the student to withdraw. An action

can still be a caring action if it responds to inferred rather than expressed needs, but in order for any action to be caring it must be both intended as care (by the one-caring) and understood as caring (by the one-cared-for). Pragmatically, the way caring actions are received matters a great deal: diligent educators may work hard to get students to engage in an activity because they strongly believe it will enhance the well-being of students, but if students are not interested then they do not receive the intent as caring. Thus, creating a perception among students of authentic teacher caring may be fundamentally important to stimulating student interest in a new topic.<sup>5</sup>

This understanding of caring has several implications for reflective social and emotional education practitioners. Critics have suggested that social and emotional education often teaches students behavioral and emotional self-regulatory skills rather than developing their capacity to care for themselves and others. As Hoffman forcefully argues, “the language of caring ideals often devolves to a discourse about control, rules, contracts, choices, activities, and organizational structures. In effect, substance is replaced by structure; feeling is replaced by form. Most tellingly, caring and community are conceptualized as things teachers teach children to do by getting them to behave in appropriate ways.”<sup>6</sup> However, caring teachers who see their role as also teaching their students how to care have the power to shape critical socio-emotional understandings and behavior. The structure of caring evinced by SEL educators may create a sense of caring that is authentic and democratic, or instrumental and authoritarian.

**Figure 1. Caring Model**



From Noddings, N. (2013). *Caring: A relational approach to ethics and moral education*. Univ of California Press.

In addition, in order to be authentic, social and emotional education ought to be grounded in the expressed needs of a particular group of learners. In other words, there is no simple prescription for a set of behaviors that will induce the caring dynamic proposed by Noddings. Even if the teacher does not have a deep understanding of the needs of each student, the inferred needs of learners mustn't be so far removed from their felt and expressed needs that the actions of educators are perceived as inauthentic. Above all, practitioners of social and emotional education must skillfully understand and attend to the needs their students are expressing, and must also be attentive to the degree to which their actions meet those needs. Of course there are limits: teachers cannot meet every need that a student brings to school. However, understanding the range of needs and interests that are relevant to particular social-emotional learning goals becomes a prerequisite to creating healthy, effective relationships that allow students to learn how to develop healthy relationships with themselves and others. This means that social-emotional learning programs need to be grounded in dialogue and experience, lest social and emotional education become about meeting the needs of educators rather than learners.

### Implications for Practice

- The practice of SEL educators, to the extent possible, ought to be based on the expressed interests of students
- If self-regulation is one goal of social and emotional education, it ought to be self-regulation for *care* not simply *social harmony*

## SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND ORGANIZATIONAL CARING

Social and emotional education generally happens under the auspices of an organized setting – a classroom, school, or out-of-school program. Organizations that provide educational and other services for students adopt and implement programs and practices that have SEL objectives, and provide guidance to those who are working with youth. As SEL education practitioners teach and model a way of being in relationships that shapes their students' actions and reactions, students respond in ways that support the practice. If an educator's approach is viewed as grounded in caring, learners are much more likely to internalize the lesson.

Joan Tronto suggests three important considerations for organizations aspiring to offer care.<sup>7</sup> First, such organizations must be aware of the aims/purposes of care. Second, their members must explicitly consider the way that power relations shape the care that they are offering. Third, they must be cognizant of the particularity of care – different approaches may be called for in working with particular people or groups and there is no simple formula for the expression of caring. Although Tronto's considerations are directed toward organizations generally, they are particularly apropos for organizations offering social and emotional education for children and youth.

Tronto's considerations have three important implications for schools and youth-serving organizations engaged in social emotional education. First, school and youth serving organizations should embed caring as an element of all practices rather than only offering SEL programs as a discrete part of the curriculum.

Second, explicitly highlighting the purposes of social emotional education emphasizes its role in fomenting more caring relationships as well as contributing to other valued goals (cognitive



development). As such, SEL is not an appendage to a focus on achievement or skill-building, but instead a “way of being”.

Third, SEL must challenge the unequal power relationships that are a fact of life in schools, where adults have far more influence than youth. Real caring is more difficult to achieve in settings with unequal power. Schools and youth-serving groups have a role to play in thoughtfully examining and changing these power relationships in order to ensure that authentically caring relationships and classrooms exist, often simply by engaging in critical conversations about how power is shaping interactions between learners and educators. One important facet of SEL is ensuring that students grow into responsibility for enacting their adult roles, where they will assume more influence and authority. Consequently, one important aspect of caring about learners is modeling the responsible use of power on behalf of others.

### **Implications for Practice**

- Any organization engaged in social and emotional education needs to have space to formally consider the way that unequal power relationships shape practice
- The best social and emotional education is embedded in everyday practice, not a separate programmatic element

## **SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND CARING COMMUNITIES**

The creation of mutually supportive communities is central to the practice of social and emotional education.<sup>8</sup> Even as students in settings where SEL occurs are participants in the school or out-of-school-time community where they are participating in social and emotional education, they are also members of a larger local community with its own pressures, challenges, and assets. Although students are part of both communities, the explicit aim of social and emotional educators is that the skills and knowledge that students gain can be applied to help them meet goals and surmount challenges in their everyday lives.

To achieve this aim, organizations that offer social and emotional education must be grounded in the local community. Kathryn Riley argues that schools (or other education organizations) are physical settings, but are also a way that students can situate themselves in the world with a sense of belonging.<sup>9</sup> Organizations offering social and emotional education, if they have dense ties to the local community, can offer learners a valuable way not only to positively participate in their community, but also to contextualize their place. Importantly, it is not enough to create a positive space within social and emotional education organizations because this will not prepare learners to address the unique challenges they face outside the learning environment.

### **Implications for Practice**

- Practitioners of social and emotional education play a valuable role in helping students make sense of their “place” in the community
- Practitioners of social and emotional education should therefore make every effort to develop a deep and nuanced understanding of the communities where they work

## CONCLUSION

Teachers nearly always intend to care for and about their students. They want their students to be successful, both personally and academically. Yet, every teacher has experienced a disconnect between their intent to care and the way the caring is received by students. This potential disconnect between the way care is intended and received is especially relevant for practitioners of social and emotional education, who are teaching students how to care for and about themselves and others.

When practiced authentically, caring (at an individual, organizational, or community level) fosters a stronger sense of belonging and engagement among students. This in turn leads to social and emotional learning. Yet, if social and emotional educators are responding to perceived rather than expressed needs, or if they are mismanaging power relationships between themselves or students, or misreading the purpose of their teaching (care), then healthy social emotional learning will not take place. Only individual organizations that purposefully practice critical reflection on their social and emotional education techniques will help their students to achieve lasting social and emotional growth.

## REFERENCES

---

- <sup>1</sup>Mayeroff, M. (1971). *On caring*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- <sup>2</sup>Antrop-González, R., & De Jesús, A. (2006). Toward a theory of critical care in urban small school reform: examining structures and pedagogies of caring in two Latino community-based schools *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 19(4), 409-433
- <sup>3</sup>Battistich, V., Solomon, D., Watson, M., & Schaps, E. (1997). Caring school communities. *Educational Psychologist*, 32(3), 137-151.
- <sup>4</sup>Weissbourd, D., & Jones, S. (2014). *The children we mean to raise: The real messages adults are sending about values*. Making Caring Common Project, Harvard Graduate School of Education.
- <sup>5</sup>Noddings, N. (1992). *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education advances in contemporary educational thought, volume 8*. ERIC; Noddings, N. (2005). Identifying and responding to needs in education. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 35(2), 147-159; Noddings, N. (2006). Educating whole people: A response to Jonathan Cohen. *Harvard Educational Review*, 76(2), 238-242.
- <sup>6</sup>Hoffman, D. M. (2009). Reflecting on social emotional learning: A critical perspective on trends in the united states. *Review of Educational Research*, 79(2), 533-556.
- <sup>7</sup>Tronto, J. C. (2010). Creating caring institutions: Politics, plurality, and purpose. *Ethics and Social Welfare*, 4(2), 158-171.
- <sup>8</sup>Battistich, V., Solomon, D., Watson, M., & Schaps, E. (1997). Caring school communities. *Educational Psychologist*, 32(3), 137-151.
- <sup>9</sup>Riley, K. (2013). *Leadership of place: Stories from schools in the US, UK and South Africa*. A&C Black.

